

~~Secret~~

E777

D
6C11

Upswing in Sino-North Korean Ties

North Korea has made a substantial and largely successful effort to improve relations with Beijing over the past year, in part to counterbalance what it sees as growing US support for Seoul. The North Korean success with Beijing reflects both its longer and closer relations with the Chinese and the failure of the USSR, its other major ally, to respond to increased North Korean overtures. Beijing's favorable response is in line with its longstanding goal of maintaining influence in P'yongyang. China, however, continues its tacit support of the status quo in Korea, and we foresee no major change in North Korean policy resulting from its improved relationship with Beijing.

China-USSR-North Korean Triangle

The period in which North Korean relations with China have been closer than its ties with the Soviet Union can be traced back to 1969-70. At that time, Beijing was moving toward a rapprochement with the United States and concurrently took special efforts to shore up its relationship with P'yongyang to keep the North Koreans from drifting into Moscow's orbit. Due in large part to greater Chinese attention, and to the Soviet failure to compete energetically, Sino-North Korean ties remained generally good in the 1970s. Toward the end of the decade, however, when Beijing accelerated its efforts to normalize relations with the United States, some tension in Beijing-P'yongyang ties began to appear.

Kim Il-song almost certainly saw in formal Sino-US normalization in early 1979 renewed evidence of China's willingness to subordinate P'yongyang's interests to its own broader strategic concerns. Beijing, for example, became noticeably less supportive of P'yongyang's insistence on the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. At the same time, China began to relax its longstanding prohibition of direct trade with South

Korea. By 1981, total trade amounted to almost \$500 million, approaching the level of China's trade with the North.

Concern about the possible consequences of closer Sino-US cooperation prompted P'yongyang initially to step up its efforts to court the Soviets. North Korean messages marking the October Revolution became noticeably warmer in 1978 and 1979. By August 1980, the 35th anniversary of liberation from Japanese rule, Kim Il-song for the first time in many years publicly acknowledged the role of the Soviet Red Army in defeating Japan. Previously, the North Koreans had emphasized—in line with the *chuche* ideology of self-reliance—only the role of Kim's guerrillas. The North Koreans followed up this gesture by sending Premier Yi Chong-ok, the fifth-ranking official in the party hierarchy, to the 26th Soviet Communist Party Congress in February 1981. But Moscow largely ignored these moves. The Soviets continued to refuse to supply advanced weapons systems to the North and to restrict economic support. Moscow, which had long been uncomfortable with Kim Il-song's independent and sometimes erratic policies, also was displeased with P'yongyang's failure to meet its bilateral trade commitments.

In contrast, South Korea's relations with the United States took a dramatic turn for the better, beginning in early 1981. The United States reaffirmed its security commitment in South Korea by inviting President Chun Doo Hwan to Washington and formally ending the withdrawal of US troops. This was followed by announcements of the sale of advanced weapons to South Korea, including F-16s, and more recently by high-level visits to Seoul.

Tilt Toward China

Having been rebuffed by Moscow, P'yongyang again turned toward Beijing in mid-1981; the North Koreans almost certainly calculated that China's concerns

~~Secret~~

EA EAJ 82-017
11 August 1982

920565 • 34

about Soviet influence and growing strains in US-China relations over Taiwan could work in its favor. In celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Chinese-North Korean mutual assistance treaty in July 1981, P'yongyang rhapsodized its "blood-sealed," "militant," "very precious," and "indestructible" ties with its "comrades in arms" and "class brothers" in China. It had used no comparable phrases in marking the 20th anniversary of its nearly identical treaty with Moscow a few days earlier. [REDACTED]

Beijing responded positively with visits by Premier Zhao Ziyang in December 1981 and Defense Minister Geng Biao in June 1982. These gestures, moreover, were made in the context of foreign policy themes emphasizing China's Third World ties and its independent international role. The Chinese may have felt less constrained in making such a response as a result of the strains in Sino-US ties. Both visits were marked by unusually strong attacks on Washington's policy toward Korea. Zhao characterized the US troop presence in the South as "a major factor in the instability of Northeast Asia." Geng carried this comment a step further by referring to the "US hegemonists and their plot to create two Koreas," an indirect reflection of China's criticism of US policy on Taiwan. Between these visits, the Chinese delivered 40 F-7 fighters (China's version of the MIG-21) to North Korea, the first delivery of combat aircraft since the normalization of Sino-US relations. There are also some indications that the Chinese may have been curtailing their trade with the South Koreans since early this year, although Beijing appears to be cautiously continuing to expand unofficial contacts with South Korea, especially in athletic competitions. [REDACTED]

Beijing may regard the transfer of leadership from Kim Il-song to his son Kim Chong-il as well advanced but still fraught with considerable uncertainty. Despite its past reservations about this process, Beijing may hope that investing more in its ties with P'yongyang now will build capital with a successor leadership—and perhaps indirectly minimize the chances that North Korea, like Vietnam, will become hostile in the future. [REDACTED]

In this regard, at the Chinese Ambassador's reception commemorating the anniversary of the China-North Korea mutual assistance treaty in July, the North Korean Foreign Minister invoked Kim Chong-il's name for the first time in a foreign affairs context. North Korea also used that occasion, as it had the previous year, to demonstrate the substantial imbalance existing in its relations with its two major allies. The P'yongyang media again gave the anniversary of its treaty with Moscow only brief coverage and none of the detail or warmth that characterized its coverage of the Chinese observance. Moscow's Korean-language broadcast on the occasion repeated a high-level Soviet trade official's criticism of P'yongyang for failing "to fulfill its agreements in their entirety" in the past. [REDACTED]

The new warmth in Sino-North Korean relations is further underscored by reports that Kim Il-song will visit Beijing in August or September, the first time since 1975. If such a trip takes place, Kim could be expected to ask Chinese leaders for more material support and greater backing for his political goals. But he also would probably want to review with the Chinese the status of their relations with the United States and personally assess the domestic policy and leadership changes under way in China. [REDACTED]

The Chinese might see such a visit in both bilateral and international terms. It would be a strong demonstration of support for Kim and his policies. But it would also provide the Chinese a forum to demonstrate a strengthened commitment to the Third World by honoring one of the presumed leaders of the Nonaligned Movement. [REDACTED]

No Fundamental Change in Policy

We believe none of these developments signifies a fundamental change in China's tacit support for the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing is aware that Kim's current pro-Chinese stance is not based on an ideological commitment but on Soviet unwillingness to compete for P'yongyang's favor—a fact that limits P'yongyang's leverage with China. Current Chinese support is tempered by Beijing's desire to maintain Korean stability. This was clearly evident

during the Geng trip. For all the effusiveness surrounding the visit, the Chinese Defense Minister stuck to the routine formula that US troops and military equipment should be withdrawn, without giving a time frame. [REDACTED]

P'yongyang's sensitivity about the issue of timing was well demonstrated when, according to FBIS field coverage, the North Korean translator added the word "immediately" to Geng's statement of troop withdrawal and the North Korean radio and press reported the translator's version. A Chinese Foreign Ministry official later took pains to explain to a US official in Beijing that China's policy toward P'yongyang had not changed and that he had not noticed the word "immediately" in the Geng statement. [REDACTED]

P'yongyang's tilt toward one of its traditional allies is not new. North Korea has been careful, however, not to side totally with one or the other, avoiding a direct attack on either. For instance, P'yongyang denounced the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea as outrageous, but was silent on the subsequent Chinese incursion into Vietnam and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

On balance, North Korea seems most likely to continue with its current efforts to strengthen ties with Beijing, a policy that has paid at least limited dividends in terms of Chinese political, economic, and military support. P'yongyang is almost certainly hopeful that strains in Sino-US relations will somehow work to its advantage. At the same time, the North seems likely to probe from time to time for additional Soviet support—not with high expectations perhaps, but out of prudence because potential gains could be considerable. Indeed, only the Soviets can provide the advanced technology and weapons systems that the North wants. Moscow, however, has shown little inclination to provide such support. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]